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ABSTRACT

A study examined parent decisions prior to and during reading aloud events with their first-grade children. Subjects were the parents of 342 first-graders in a suburban public elementary school district. Multiple methods of data collection were used, including surveys, diaries, interviews, videotapes, and stimulated recalls. Based on an analysis of survey data, 16 parents were selected to further participate in data collection. Some of the findings from the surveys included the following: almost all parents said they read aloud to their first graders; the mother was the parent who was by far the most likely to do the reading; the percentages of mothers who worked and read to their first graders were similar to those who were not employed outside the home; storybooks were overwhelmingly the most commonly used genre; and a switch from home libraries to public libraries as primary sources of materials was found. Analysis of the additional data sources, particularly the interviews, showed that patterns existed--parents who made similar decisions were grouped together in one of six categories. Parents in four of the categories (professionals, artists, journeymen, and laborers) regularly read to their children, while parents in the categories of craftsmen or novices did not regularly read to their first graders. Findings suggest that while the importance of routine reading events should not be minimized, decisions parents make regarding purposes, materials, and strategies will also highly influence the effectiveness of their reading aloud events. (RS)

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PARENT DECISION MAKING IN READING ALOUD TO FIRST GRADERS

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Perspective

The emergent literacy perspective has identified "parents reading aloud to their children" as one important method of literacy acquisition (Bloome, 1985). In addition, reading aloud has been identified as a potential source of other benefits, including some that make high cognitive demands on children, such as conceptual development and the improvement of inferential comprehension skills (Becher, 1986).

While the role of parents in these reading aloud events has not been ignored by researchers, it has not traditionally been a central topic in the reading research community (Becher, 1986). The foci of many past studies have been on examining either the actual act of reading aloud itself (Flood, 1977) or its influence on children (Ninio & Bruner, 1978). When decision making in reading aloud has been examined, it has been the decisions made be teachers, not parents, that have been studied (Martinez & Teale, 1990; Michener, 1986; Morrow, 1988). Since Edwards (1989) found that teachers and mothers interact differently when reading aloud to children, further examinations of parents' decisions in these reading activities are needed.

Although first grade has been identified as the traditional grade in which many children learn to read (Durkin, 1989), there is little known about the reading-aloud decisions parents make as changes are occurring in their first-graders' decoding abilities (i.e., on whether or not to continue reading, on what strategies to use in these reading activities). Furthermore, in view of the recent findings of Yaden, Smolkin, and Conlon (1989) that children's interactions during reading aloud are influenced by the types of materials used, investigations of decisions that parents make about reading materials for their school-aged children are also warranted.

Purpose of the Study

While no one method of reading aloud has been proven to be best, there are, nevertheless, some decisions about reading aloud that are perceived as being more effective than others (Taylor, 1986). This study examined parent decisions prior to and during reading aloud events with their first graders - decisions on why (or why not) parents read to them (purposes), decisons on what they read to them (materials), and decisions on what to do as they read to them (strategies).

Method

The subjects of this study consisted of the parents of 342 first-graders in a suburban public elementary school district. Although all of the children attended one kindergarten/ first-grade building, they were drawn from all sections of a geographically large district. The families of these first graders represented a wide range of SES; the largest subgroup was white middle class, the smallest was

black (2%). In addition, there were growing minority populations of Asian (6%) and Hispanic (9%) families. Five percent of the population was classified as low-income.

Multiple methods of data collection were used, including surveys, diaries, interviews, videotapes, and stimulated recalls. Surveys, including a Spanish version, were mailed to all 342 parents. One folowup procedure was initiated which increased the total response to 83.6% of the parents. A computer progran, SPSS, was used to analyze the survey data.

Based on an analysis of this survey data, a subgroup of 16 parents was selected to further participate in data collection through diaries of reading aloud activities, interviews, videotapes of reading aloud sessions, and/or stimulated recalls. In selecting these parents, consideration was given to parents' genders, levels of education, ethnicity, marital statuses, employment statuses, and to children's current reading groups. The frequency of reading aloud by both parents and children, the materials used in reading aloud, and the processes of selecting reading materials were also considered.

During analysis of this additional data, a number of variables (e.g., parents' early reading experiences, attitudes toward reading aloud, use of bookstores, difficulty of materials used, and prereading strategies) were identified from a variety of sources, including some from the data collection instruments and the literature, and some that emerged from the data itself. Data from individual parents on each of these variables were coded and recorded with similar responses from other parents.

Results

Some of the findings from the surveys included:

-Almost all parents who responded to the surveys stated that they read aloud to their first graders.

-By far, the parent most likely to do the reading was the mother. Reading aloud was "Mom's job."

-The percentages of mothers who work fulltime or partime who read three or more times a week were quite similar to those of mothers who were not employed outside of the home.

-As expected, storybooks were overwhelmingly the most commonly used genre. Nonfiction and chapter books were the next most popular choices.

-Some genres were more popular with one ethnic group than another.

-A switch from home libraries to public libraries as primary sources of materials for first graders was found.

It was from the additional data sources, particularly from the interviews, that the most importants findings of this study emerged. Analysis showed that patterns existed; clusters of parents who gave similar responses for one variable were frequently found to have given similar

responses for other variables. As a result of this clustering, parents who made similar decisions have been grouped together in one of six categories. These categories reveal that parents have an array of perceptions about reading aloud. These perceptions determine parents' purposes for reading (or not reading) aloud to their children. In turn, these purposes for reading aloud determine the materials and strategies that parents use when reading aloud. While there is overlapping of purposes, materials, and strategies among categories, there are certain characteristics that set categories apart from each other. Because reading aloud can be described as "mom's job," metaphors relating to jobs have been used to identify these six categories.

Parents in four of the six categories regularly read to their children:

Professionals. In general, professionals are described as people who have great skill in a specified role; they are highly informed about their field. When the term Professionals is used to describe a group of parents who read aloud to their children, it is to highlight the emphasis they place on stimulating the academic and intellectual growth of their children. Professionals are very aware of the potential benefits to be found in reading aloud; they continue to be the primary readers in reading aloud events with their first graders.

Professionals carefully select the materials they use when they read aloud to their children. They consciously select materials (i.e., chapter books) that are challenging. In addition, Professionals use a wide array of prereading, during reading, and post-reading strategies as they read. These strategies frequently require their first graders to use higher levels of thinking. Examples of scaffolding are found throughout their reading sessions; meaning making is often on high cognitive levels.

Artists. The word "artists" is used to describe persons who do things that have form and beauty; they are aesthetically sensitive. Parents who are described as Artists are people who love all kinds of reading, including reading aloud to their children. Because reading is an activity that gives them so much pleasure, Artists want to share this with their children and want their children to feel the same way about reading as they do. This is primarily why they read to their children. A secondary purpose is to stimulate academic and intellectual growth in their children. While Artists continue their roles as primary readers to their first graders, their children are joining them as readers in these reading sessions. Fathers who routinely read to their children are likely to be Artists.

Materials and strategies that are used by Artists also reflect this focus on enjoyment. Materials are at first graders' current levels of comprehension and are from many genres. Strategies which encourage the active participation

of the children, such as discussions and dramatic readings, are employed.

Journeymen. Workers who have learned a trade and are qualified to work at it but not at masters' levels are called journeymen. While similarities seem to exist between some aspects of Journeymen and those of Professionals and Artists, Journeymen's actualizations are usually not as cognitively demanding; this results in lower levels of meaning making for these children. Parents who are called Journeymen do not feel pressured by outside forces to read aloud nor do they strive to reach specific academic or intellectual goals. They read to their first graders because they believe it is "good for them." They also read to their children because both they and their children enjoy such activities. The children of Journeymen are joining their parents as readers in these reading events.

The materials that Journeymen use are usually easy readers, books that are not challenging to decode or to understand. It is not unusual for the books that Journeymen currently use with their first graders to have less complex story lines and simpler vocabularies than the materials they used before their children exhibited any decoding skills.

The use of prereading and post-reading strategies was not documented in this study. During-reading strategies were found; they did not, however, require higher-level thinking on the part of the children.

Laborers. Persons whose work is characterized largely by physical exertion are called laborers. Parents who are classified as Laborers are those parents for whom reading aloud to their first-grade is toilsome; it is a chore. While Artists relax by reading to their children, Laborers hurry through reading aloud so they can finally relax. Their children may or may not be joining them as primary readers in these reading aloud sessions.

Laborers are a new phenomenon, the results of a perspective which recognizes the enormous potential of reading aloud and urges parents to read to their children. Laborers, however, operate from a reading readiness perspective. Consequently, although they may not understand the connection, these parents believe that somehow reading aloud will help their children become better readers. That is their primary goal. They do not enjoy reading to their children but they feel pressured into doing so. Surprisingly, in spite of the parents' personal feelings about reading aloud, their children enjoy these reading events.

The materials that Journeymen choose reflect their purposes for reading aloud. These parents often select books that they believe will further develop their first graders' decoding skills. Such materials include easy readers and other books with simple story lines.

Strategies are limited to during-reading strategies that require only low-level thinking, such as literal questioning. Laborers may still use baby talk, such as "kitty cat" with their first graders.

In addition to the four above categories of parents who regularly read to their first graders, there are two categories of parents who do not, Craftsmen and Novices:

Craftsmen. People who are skilled in the mechanics of an art are called craftsmen. Parents who are called Craftsmen have identified reading aloud as a valuable tool to help children become independent readers. Since their children are now exhibiting some decoding skills, Craftmen lack purpose for continuing to read aloud to their children. Their children have replaced them as primary readers.

The materials that their children currently use include materials that they can decode independently. Their choices of materials often reflect their parents' pragmatic beliefs about reading and frequently include nonfiction materials, such as encyclopedias and biographies. When materials are too difficult, these young readers will seek parental assistance. Ironically, as their desires to comprehend outstrip their abilities to decode, these first graders are again becoming more dependent on parents-as-readers.

Since Craftsmen see themselves as "surrogate readers" until their children can read for themselves, their use of strategies is limited. Paired readings is one that is used when the materials are difficult to decode. With the limited amount of adult participation in their reading events, meaning making for the children of Craftsmen is adversely affected. Opportunities for scaffolding are rare, and attention must be diverted from meaning making to decoding.

Novices. People who are inexperienced or untrained in a particular area are called novices. In this study, Novices are those parents who do not engage in read-aloud events with their children. To understand this group of parents, consideration must be given to ethnicity and gender (i.e., ESL families and single-parent fathers). Unlike other groups of parents in this study, Novices do not exhibit any purposes for reading aloud and depend on school for reading-related activities.

Unlike the homes of other groups of parents, the homes of Novices do not have many reading materials for children. A variety of reasons, including financial and language barriers, often account for this.

The children of Novices were the only children in this study who were not read to at one time or another by their parents. Consequently, they have not been exposed to any of the reading aloud strategies that children in this study have experienced.

An Eclectic. An eclectic is one who choose or selects from various systems or sources. Parents who are Eclectics display a variety of reading aloud behaviors that are usually ascribed to other parent categories. One Eclectic emerged from this study. This parent exhibited characteristics of several groups, including Professionals, Artists, and Craftsmen. It is likely that characteristics can be blended in a variety of ways to make many Eclectic profiles.

Conclusions

Parents are encouraged to read daily to their children. While the importance of such routine reading events should not be minimized, parents need to be aware that frequency is only one component. Decisions they make regarding purposes, materials, and strategies will also highly influence the effectiveness of their reading aloud events. Knowledge of these categories could provide parents with a framework for making more informed decisions about their goals for reading aloud, and could help them choose materials and strategies compatible with those goals.

Categories are not rigid; they simply reflect a picture of parents "typical" reading aloud sessions. Also, parents may move from one category to another based on parent-centered developments, such as changes in employment status, or on child-centered changes, such as changes in decoding abilities. Furthermore, as the one Eclectic in this study demonstrated, it is also possible for a parent to exhibit one set of characteristics with one child and a different set of reading aloud behaviors with another child.

The term "reading aloud" had many meanings for the parents in this study. It may be more appropriate to use the term "listening to stories" when discussing reading aloud events in which parents read to their children. "Listening to stories" could highlight the roles of children as listeners/thinkers/discussants and could deemphasize their roles as decoders.

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